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ABSTRACT

A nontraditional degree program for adult students at Southwest Texas State University instituted a bulletin board system (BBS) in support of required courses in both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs to provide information, communication, and mentoring. The BBS was especially useful to students in preparing their portfolios of life experiences, for which they could be granted as much as 24 hours of credit. When the BBS was started, it was expected that it would provide only support and interaction. After the first semester, it became clear that some students were interested in using the BBS for new learning activities. A research hypothesis was formed that adults with certain learning styles as measured by Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) (concrete experience and active experimentation) are more likely to select electronically mediated learning strategies to assist them in learning. Observation correlated with learning styles research using Kolb's LSI supported the hypothesis. The BBS program is recommended for educational activities for adults, because it provides interaction that is not time specific, it allows for quick feedback on homework and assignments, and it is a new avenue for learning. (The requirements for bachelor's and master's degrees in the nontraditional program are described in the report.) (KC)

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ELECTRONICALLY-MEDIATED LEARNING AMONG ADULTS

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ELECTRONICALLY-MEDIATED LEARNING AMONG ADULTS

Jill H. Ellsworth, Ph.D.

Part I

Introduction

At Southwest Texas State University there is a long-standing successful non-traditional degree program involving about 800 majors. It is is a fairly "traditional" non-traditional program, and the faculty sought to bring themselves into the latter half of the 20th century. Last fall the program instituted electronically-mediated learning BBS in support of required courses in both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs to provide information, communication and mentoring to adult students.

History

SWTSU, through the OCED Division, has been serving the working adult student with nontraditional academic programs since 1973. It was one of the first institutions in Texas to recognize the needs of working adults, and has one of the largest nontraditional programs in the country. Since 1973, more than 5000 students have entered and completed the program.

Introduction to The Degree Programs

The Bachelor of Applied Arts and Science (BAAS) and the Master of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies (MSIS) are interdisciplinary degree programs designed for mature adults who need individualized academic programs, and one that awards credit for nontraditional forms of learning.

The heart of the OCED nontraditional programs rests with the ability to provide access to high quality academic programs. Often, institutional apathy toward the special needs of adult students make it difficult to complete a college degree. At SWT, students can receive credit for knowledge they already possess. BAAS students have rich life experiences that can qualify them for up to 24 semester hours of credit, or have had training conducted by business, industry, or the military that are recognized by the American Council on Education, for up to 30 credits. Up to a maximum of 30 hours can be awarded for examinations (CLEP, DANTES, etc.) Graduate students may be awarded 9 credits for non-collegiate learning.

Another significant aspect of the programs offered through OCED is the opportunity to individualize the program. Faculty analyze student strengths and weaknesses providing a basis for determining student options for completing degree requirements.

These are interdisciplinary degrees and interdisciplinary degrees focus on the development of broad generic skills applicable to a wide range of occupational opportunity. Considering that the average worker will probably hold six jobs requiring different skills, plus the fact that the knowledge explosion has caused specialized degrees to become dated, interdisciplinary degrees emphasizing the development of skills not related to a single path provides the greatest flexibility.

An individualized program allows adult students to cooperatively select educational goals and academic courses that are related to their career and life objectives. Therefore, relevance and applicability to their career pattern is insured. On the other hand, most traditional degree programs are prescriptive in nature. They specify what students must take and do not take into account what students have learned from experience or career objectives. Generally, prescriptive programs are for traditionally aged students and individualized programs are for the more mature adult student who wants to assume an active role in determining their educational program.

The Bachelor's Degree - 128 credits

The BAAS has four modules:

The General Studies module focuses on a firm liberal arts foundation, and includes English composition, communications, social science, philosophy, natural sciences, literature, history, government, math, international studies, art and music, PE, and the culminating internship as the capstone course.

Occupational Emphasis: 48 credits which includes the 3 credit portfolio assessment course, where students can receive up to 24 credits for knowledge and competencies gained at work, and related coursework. Awarded by an assessment committee, the number of credits in based on the quality of the portfolio, the collegiate level and complexity of the knowledge base for the skills, and the overall sophistication of the material presented. Students may also present significant training listed in the ACE guide for assessment up to 30 more credits.

The Professional Development Module of 18 upper level credits must be comprised of courses from three departments with a cohesive conceptual base. The courses must have some relationship to an overall concept. I have one student who has a focus in interdisciplinary environmental management, with courses in management, the sciences and public policy. I have another who is interested in industrial quality assurance which will have courses in technology, industrial psychology, management and assessment.

The last module is the elective module, offering the student the opportunity to explore new fields or to supplement and support the Professional Development module. Often students will take a language or computing courses.

The Masters Degree - 39 credits

Entry Module - 9 hours of research, quantitative, qualitative and communications skills to prepare for the research project (thesis and for the Academic module)

Academic Module - 21 hour, interdisciplinary module, in which up to 9 hours can be awarded through a portfolio assessment (non-credit) activity. As with the undergraduate Professional Development module, the focus can be any three conceptually related disciplines, such as planning and management, etc.

Exit Module - 9 hours one can complete a field experience (internship, or a research practicum to apply theoretical constructs in a practical setting. Either experience can be completed with a thesis or written intensive exams. Both options require oral exams.

Part II

The program seeks to provide a wide range of opportunities for learning methods and access: correspondence courses, off-campus courses, eight-week courses, weekend courses, credit by challenge exam, Clep, and the assessment of work life experience. In keeping with that mission, last Fall, the faculty instituted a electronically-mediated learning vehicle: a computer BBS to provide access to information, peers and faculty.

The BBS

These are intensive degree programs requiring a lot of interaction between students and faculty. The mentoring activity is especially key in the initial phases of the degree programs when the students are developing the portfolio (in the case of both graduate and undergraduate students), and taking the research course (in the case of the graduate students). To meet the needs of less mobile, physically challenged and older adults, the students have access to a faculty maintained computer-based BBS for information and assistance with course assignments and they participate in an on-line assessment of their own learning.

The BBS is designed to provide interaction and to impart information to students and faculty with student/student, faculty/student, and faculty/faculty interchange. Modules cover four specific courses (2 undergraduate, 2 graduate), adult learning, faculty research, and limited general interest:

1. OCED 4350 (course-specific), with sub-units on two particularly difficult components

2. OCED 4340 (course-specific)

3. TECH 5384 (graduate course-specific)

4. TECH 5390 (graduate course-specific)

5. Southwest Texas State University - general information

6. Open discussion

7. BAAS (degree information)

8. Adult Learning research (faculty)

When the BBS was started, it was envisioned that it would only provide support and interaction. After the first semester, it became clear that some students were interested in using the BBS for new or Alpha learning activities, as opposed to limiting it to supportive/reinforcing activities.

As in all Universities, it is not enough to do something, the faculty need to assess it as well. To that end the faculty has been engaged in research relative to the BBS and learning styles, in a effort to understand students learning.

The research hypothesis was:

Adults with certain learning styles as measured by Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (Concrete Experience, and Active Experimentation) are more likely to select electronically-mediated learning strategies to assist them in learning.

(The LSI describes how adults perceive or grasp experience and information (concrete vs abstract; sensing/feeling vs thinking), and how they process or transform experience and information (active vs reflective; doing vs watching) and categorizes the style into four styles: Concrete Experience, Abstract Conceptualization, Active Experimentation, and Reflective Observation.)

The research included the following objectives:

1. To investigate the utilization of electronically-mediated learning strategies by adult students. For example, who uses the strategy (M/F, age, etc.), for what kinds of learning tasks (reinforcement, peer interaction, problem solving, etc.)

2. To investigate hypothesized correlations between LSI style and the utilization of electronically-mediated learning strategies by adult students.

The research involved both descriptive techniques to describe utilization, and correlative methodologies to compare learning styles using an existing instrument (Kolb's LSI) and student usage of a computer information system in the OCED Division (BBS), and their use of a survey of learning and an open-ended response section.

Initial Data Analysis

Usage:

Sex	61% male		39% female					
Age	18-24 8%		25-34 38%		35-44 27%		45-54 16%	
	55-64 7%		65+ 4%					
Race	White 83%		Hispanic 12%		Black 4%		Other 1%	
Level	Undergraduate 68%			Graduate 32%				

Kinds of Learning Tasks:

Reinforcement (Course Related)	92%
Problem Solving (Course Related)	54%
(University Related)	51%
Peer Interaction	90%
Faculty Interaction (Course Related)	91%
(Non-course related)	37%
Alpha Learning (Learning of new material)	19%
Recreation (games, informal non-university)	21%

Learning Style:

Concrete Experience	30%
Abstract Conceptualization	14%
Active Experimentation	33%
Reflective Observation	23%

Overall, the users were undergraduates who were enrolled in the first course, the Portfolio Assessment course (4350), and as the research hypotheses stated, had learning styles in Active Experimentations and Concrete Experience. The Reflective Observers frequently checked in to "read the mail" as they say in Ham radio circles, but they were less active in using the board.

Once they mastered the intricacies of the BBS (menus, sending and receiving E-mail, reading files, up and downloading), the students generally became frequent users. Some students checked on once or twice and never came back. (The faculty surveyed these users to correlate learning styles.)

Implications for Practice

We recommend this method to anyone engaged in educational activities with adults. It provides quick and easy feed-back mechanisms, surprising response and yet another way to support flexibility in learning.

It provides:

Interaction which is not time-specific: increasingly students are not campus-based and work a variety of schedules.

Quick feedback on homework and other assignments allowing for quicker turn around: courses for adults frequently meet just once a week making feedback on written work difficult.

A new avenue for learning - not time reliant, allowing for a certain interpersonal distance for those who desire it, and allowing students to access information in an exploratory fashion, or by fairly random access to information, or using a structure which is useful to him/her, vs structured by the instructor.

For those of you who would like to reach me via BITNET, my bitnet address is JE01@SWTEXAS. The bulletin board operates at 512/245-3049, 2400 baud, no parity, 8 bits, 1 stop bit.